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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TBILISI 000089

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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: NINO BURJANADZE FROM THE OUTSIDE LOOKING
IN

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary/Comment: The transition from being Speaker of Parliament and interim President to being one of many in a marginalized non-Parliamentary opposition has been a difficult one for Nino Burjanadze. Burjanadze has been unable to garner much more than a meager level of public support since her move to the non-Parliamentary opposition. Her former UNM allies simply ignore her. A reluctance to work with potential non-Parliamentary opposition members unless they agree to support her has not been well received by her potential political allies. Many non-Parliamentary opposition leaders openly speak about their dislike for her. Both in public and in private, Burjanadze has become increasingly radical, joining opposition calls for Saakashvili's resignation and early elections. Burjanadze has fallen into the unenviable political position of sounding like a radical non-Parliamentary opposition member without the benefit of having their support. Some of her friends and moderate supporters have expressed their regret at taking a more confrontational path. Increasingly walling herself off among her core group of supporters, Burjanadze seems unwilling to accept that her position in the political landscape has fundamentally changed, leaving us to wonder if we are seeing the beginning of the end for a Georgian political titan. End Summary/Comment.

Move to Opposition - A Political Blunder?

¶2. (C) In many ways, Burjanadze's move to the non-Parliamentary opposition could not have been scripted more poorly. By leaving the UNM in April 2008 and not running independently for Parliament, she effectively cut herself out of the political debate. Not running for Parliament has the added effect of disqualifying her from receiving public political party funds, though she is now likely eligible for the limited political party development funds from the government. Tbilisi Mayor and UNM stalwart, Gigi Ugulava told the Ambassador that her move was not well thought out and that her natural political space would be in the moderate Parliamentary opposition. Ugulava feels that had she stayed in Parliament, she would be polling around 20% rather than the 3% she currently garners. (Embassy Note: Ugulava is citing a recent Quinlan, Greenberg, and Rosner poll commissioned by the UNM. End Note.) Outflanked by Giorgi Targamadze, whose Christian Democratic Party (CDM) is filling that void in parliament, Burjanadze is finding that her natural constituency has migrated elsewhere. Ugulava believes that she is making her political decisions, including the cutting of ties with UNM and espousing radical political views that are not her own, on the bad advice of her father and husband. When the Ambassador asked Burjanadze about CDM's apparent success as a moderate opposition party, she dismissed Targamadze as nothing more than a creation of Interior Minister Vano Merabishvili. While well respected both in Georgia and on the international scene during her time as a parliamentarian, Burjanadze has little experience as a grass roots politician, something Ugulava was quick to

highlight. In effect, the timing and nature of her departure from government left her only one choice when she decided to return to politics, the non-Parliamentary opposition.

I'm Here, Now Follow Me!

13. (C) Numerous non-Parliamentary leaders can hardly withhold their disdain for Burjanadze (mirroring the private disdain she has for most of them). Although some more moderate non-Parliamentary groups attempted to reach out to Burjanadze (notably New Rights and Republicans), these political leaders tell us that Burjanadze views cooperation as a one way street. Poloff has been told repeatedly that Burjanadze will only discuss political cooperation with potential allies if they agree in advance to support her for President or as the head of any Parliamentary ticket. Thus far, nobody has taken her up on her "offer". Irakli Alasania would seem to be a natural political fit as an ally, but thus far also seems to be interested in being at the top of his own ticket. Other than Burjanadze, her party consists of no notable names and nobody who brings with them any obvious constituency or funding base. Kakha Kukava (Conservatives) claimed to Poloff that Burjanadze had called "half of Tbilisi," but nobody was willing to join her party. Another commentator said the one common theme among those in Burjanadze's party is they are all a "former" something or other. A local staff member asked an acquaintance, Manana Salukvadze, who was working for UNDP why she joined Burjanadze's party. She replied that the salary Burjanadze offered was very high.

14. (C) We anticipate that Burjanadze would have had

TBILISI 00000089 002 OF 003

difficulty winning over the leaders of the non-Parliamentary opposition, even had she been more willing to treat them as equals. The most radical non-Parliamentary opposition such as Kukava, Eka Beselia (United Georgia), Koba Davitashvili (Party of People), and others disliked her when she was with the UNM, something which has not changed. Kukava, Beselia, and Zurab Tkemaladze (Industrialists) (as well as others) have told Poloff that Burjanadze uses her relationship with U.S. and European officials to intimate that she has foreign support for her party. Each of them told Poloff that Burjanadze's camp is behind pushing rumors that she is the U.S. choice to replace Saakashvili (reftel). Only Tkemaladze had anything positive to say about Burjanadze, commenting that she might have some chance to lead a multi-party, non-Parliamentary opposition group, but only if she radically changed her attitude towards the members of the group. Apparently the dislike is mutual; Burjanadze has never indicated she would ever work with the more radical parties. Although Burjanadze cooperated closely with New Rights and Republican leaders in formulating her approach to the November 7, 2008, anniversary protest (they all eventually decided not to participate), she made harsh derogatory remarks about New Rights leader David Gamkrelidze at a lunch with the Ambassador. Ironically, the only member of the non-Parliamentary opposition Burjanadze now appears open to working with is long time rival and nemesis, former Foreign Minister Salome Zourabashvili.

UNM Does Not Return My Calls - With Misha, It's Personal

15. (C) Burjanadze complained at length to the Ambassador about the unfair, vindictive, and generally terrible treatment she receives from her former allies. Her complaints range from being unable to use the VIP entrance at the opera, to a recent GOG decision to discontinue providing her a government car and security staff. Even though former PMs Gurgenidze, Noghaideli, Tbilisi Mayor Gigi Ugulava, and Presidential Chief of Staff Eka Sharashidze lost similar perks, Burjanadze told the Ambassador that her protection is required by law as a former acting President and that this is an illustration that Saakashvili is out to punish her. She

appears generally surprised and upset that some people no longer take her calls or seek her advice. During her lunch with the Ambassador she repeatedly called Saakashvili an undemocratic authoritarian. Burjanadze cited as evidence that there is a lack of free media that she recently had given four TV interviews, of which only a portion of one interview aired. The Ambassador politely challenged her on a number of sweeping statements to little avail. Burjanadze even went so far as to say the Russians want Saakashvili to remain President.

Painted Into a Corner

¶6. (C) A large portion of Burjanadze's initial appeal as a potential opposition leader was her reputation as a calm, thoughtful moderate who was a well-known representative of Georgia on the international scene. Now the difference between Burjanadze's rhetoric and the most radical non-Parliamentary opposition member is negligible if any. She has joined them in repeating the non-Parliamentary opposition line, calling for new elections and leveling a constant stream of criticism of President Saakashvili. She has neither articulated her party's stance, nor so far had much success in developing her foundation. Burjanadze's numbers in the latest NDI poll (choice for Parliament 3% - Party favorable 10%, unfavorable 30% - Personal favorable 30% QParty favorable 10%, unfavorable 30% - Personal favorable 30% like, 42% dislike) are not encouraging especially since her personal favorability numbers have dropped precipitously since announcing her own party and joining the non-Parliamentary opposition. Without a consistent funding source other than her family's wealth and without a party platform, Burjanadze appears to be counting on her push for new elections to keep her in the news. This may be tough however, since pre-term parliamentary elections appear extremely unlikely to occur, and the chance of pre-term Presidential elections in the near term is next to nil.

What Is Her Future

¶7. (C) Comment. Although Burjanadze might be down in the polls, we don't count her out. However, her near to mid-term political future is cloudy. If she stakes out a position on the issues and begins to engage in the substantive debate (which we have encouraged her to do), she may regain some lost ground. Another option would be for her to accept a partnership or a secondary role in a political movement; Irakli Alasania and others would certainly listen, but there is no sign that Burjanadze is ready for that. She admitted to the Ambassador that spending time in fashionable cafes in the Vake section of Tbilisi, listening to people tell her what she wants to hear is of limited benefit. Burjanadze

TBILISI 00000089 003 OF 003

also told the Ambassador that she is considering participating in IRI-sponsored political party development seminars (something that Christian Democrat leader Targamadze credits for having helped him establish a real political party). At the same time, she makes little attempt to hide her disdain for retail campaigning, which only serves to reinforce the negative stereotype held by much of the population at large that she is a leader of an out-of-touch elite. Unless she starts to do the ground work necessary to build a party, probably having to spend her own funds to do so, it is difficult to see how Burjanadze's party can survive until the next round of elections (next scheduled at the local level for 2010). Although her extensive resume will no doubt continue to open doors and guarantee media interest, as of right now, Burjanadze finds herself in a place she never thought imaginable -- just another member of the non-Parliamentary opposition.

TEFFT